

Explore God: #6 “The Uniqueness of Christ”

Cliffe Knechtle

Matt Cassidy: For those of you who participated with us in our week of fasting and prayer, I hope you have been praying for our church and our city – and enjoyed the fasting and prayer time where you might have experienced God’s presence in a new way. We did that because we are going through the Explore God series and this is the last week. We started a little sooner than other churches. Over 300 churches have been doing this and you probably know that by now. We started the series early and are finishing early – with a great lesson on the uniqueness of Christ and the uniqueness of Christianity. We have brought in a clean up batter for that message. Cliffe, why don’t you come on up.

This is Cliffe Knechtle. Cliffe and I met about 25 years ago. He has been going around the country for over 30 years now and worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He travels around the country and opens conversations. If you went to the University of Texas in the last 30 years, you probably saw him on the West Mall where there would be a crowd and some exchanges going back and forth. When I was the Student Pastor, we used to take the Youth Group down there for a couple of days to see what that looked like.

Now, Cliffe, you have come to the big house to join us. It is such a great privilege to have you here. He will be back tonight at 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. to do that thing he does on campuses, answering some of the questions we might have. We will have childcare if you need that.

Cliffe, here you go. Thanks for joining us.

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I hope you realize what an awesome church you have here and it is a real honor to be with you. Matt and his worship team, ai-ya-ya, outstanding. And the quality of the fellowship is incredible.

God is exclusive

This morning, **I want us to deal with one of the most difficult questions in our culture today**, which is Jesus’ statement in **John 14:6** where He says:

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Peter echoes those thoughts in **Acts 4:12**, where Peter looks into the faces of a bunch of monotheistic Jews and says:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given among men, by which we must be saved.

Why do we resist God's exclusivity?

Now, why, living in my culture, do I not like that? I will tell you why. Because I like to go to the grocery store and in the grocery store when I want cereal, I go to the cereal aisle. Lo and behold, there are a plethora of options: Life, Cheerios, Captain Crunch, and the list is endless. Guess what? Even when I go to get toilet paper, I like to have options.

I am a consumer. I live in a consumerist culture and the idea of *one way* is abrasive. It seems to be narrow-minded.

It seems to be intolerant. But let's switch from the grocery store to the marriage. I know very few women who want to be loved as one of many options. I know very few men who want to be loved as one of many options in their marriage.

You see, the nature of deep love is – exclusivity. Uniqueness of a person demands a unique love.

If your name is Tom and I call you Harry, Phillip, and Theodore, I am being disrespectful of you. Your name is Tom, not Theodore, Harry, or whatever.

Now, in Exodus 20:2, 3 we read:

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You are to have no other gods...

Why? Is that just narrow-minded intolerance? No. God is saying: *Here is how I treat you. I would like you to treat me the same way.*

First point – I know you by name. – I love Charlie Brown. Charlie Brown said: *I love humanity. It is just people I can't stand.* Thank you, Charlie. --- I love the idea of loving humanity but you see, that is not the challenge in life. **The challenge is to love an individual, to love a person, to connect with a person.**

So, God says: *I know you by name. Please know me by name. I find you irreplaceable. Please find me irreplaceable. I have a special love and care for you. Please have a special love and care for me. That is the only way we are going to have a relationship.*

You see, that is what sets Jesus Christ and Christianity apart from every major world religion. **Every major world religion is about a system, about following the rules. Jesus Christ calls us to be reconciled to God, not the *idea* of God but the person of God.** So, God says: *Find Me irreplaceable the*

same way I find you irreplaceable. Know Me by name the same way I know you by name and have a special love and care for Me, the same way I have a special love and care for you.

You see, folks, following Christ is a lot more like being a spouse than it is like being a consumer. Consumers love options. Consumers say: *Don't limit my options*. But a spouse says: *I want a depth to our relationship that is based on you being an individual, Me being an individual, and our connecting on a deep level and that demands uniqueness and that demands exclusivity.*

God offers us a covenant – not a contract

What makes Christianity different from every major world religion is also this. **Every other major world religion is a contract. It is a fee for service.** In other words, God, you give me this and I will give you that. God, I will give you this and you give me that.

It is like Cliffe sitting down with the painting contractor, working out a deal. I want to drive the price as low as I can; the painting contractor wants to drive what he is responsible to do as low as he can. So, I look the painting contractor in the face and I say: *I would like to pay you less money*. He says: *No problem, I am not going to paint the trim on your house and then you can pay me less*. It is a fee for service.

That is exactly what Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism essentially are – a fee for a service. If I do this, then God will do that. It is a contract.

You are here at Grace Covenant Church. **A covenant is not a contract. A covenant is an understanding that God wants more than service for a fee. God wants a relationship of loyalty.** So we enter a covenant, which is a contradiction to contract, a fee for service -- **a covenant of loyalty, a covenant of trust, a covenant of deep love, a covenant of grace, which is different from a contract.** Every religion in the world is all about contract. God, if you do this, I'll do that. Right?

Yet, in Galatians 6, the apostle Paul does write:

A man reaps what he sows.

So, there is the issue of: If I exercise my free will in a certain way, there will be consequences to my decisions – yes. But grace is radically different.

God's grace, unmerited generosity, love - is unique

When C. S. Lewis was walking through the faculty lounge at Oxford University, the faculty was having a debate on what makes Christianity different than every other world religion. Lewis said: *That is easy, grace.*

Grace is God's unmerited, undeserved generosity, love, and forgiveness extended to us. See, folks, it is all about relationship. "Be still and know that I am God." I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His suffering, becoming like Him in His death and so somehow to attain to the resurrection.

This is eternal life, that men might know You, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

What is the most important commandment, Jesus?

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbors as yourself.

Now, does your mama love you? The majority of us here would say 'yes.' When we say: Mom loves me – we don't mean the idea of mom benefits me that she loves me; the idea that mom loves me is useful; it gives me a good feelings. No, **we mean a real woman, my mother, loves me.**

What do we mean when we say: God loves me. The idea of God has this wonderful effect on me that He loves me? The idea that God loves me is kind of beneficial, it is kind of useful, so I think I will buy into it. See, that is religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism says: All religions are the same. Well, if all religions are the same, then the impersonal nature of Brahmin in Hinduism, and Allah in Islam, and Jesus Christ, a personal God who actually loves us, is all the same. What does that mean? It means nothing. **You have taken thinking totally out of the equation and in a bid for tolerance, you have essentially said: All religions are the same because I want us to be tolerant of each other.**

Do you understand that God loves you – not the idea of God – not we have constructed this idea of God and it is very beneficial to think that He loves us, so we will believe He loves us. No, **the God who is eternal, who created the Cosmos gives a rip about you and me.**

Illustration of God's intimate love of each human, not for their attainments, but for their value

See, Billy was in junior high and he was born with that horrible birth defect of cerebral palsy. Billy was at junior high school camp one summer and, yes, in junior high school you can be cruel. It is possible. So Billy was walking along the path of the camp one day and he asked a fellow camper: *Which way is it to the craft shop?* The kid twisted his body around, pointed in a hundred different directions and said: *It is that way.*

But the cruelty reached its height when Billy's camp voted that he would speak at camp devotions one morning. Those kids knew that Billy would stutter and stumble all over himself and they were

looking forward to a good laugh out of this spastic kid with cerebral palsy. So the chapel occurred and Billy's turn came and he stood up at the back and began to stumble down the aisle. Kids began to laugh. This was really going to be funny, the spastic kid.

Billy reaches the front, turns around, looks into the faces of his fellow campers and begins his speech. "J – J- Jesus l-l-loves m-m-me." Everybody got real quiet. Billy continued. "J-J-Jesus l-l-loves m-m-me." One kid started crying. Billy continued. "A-a-and I l-l-love J-J-Jesus." Every kid was crying – why? Because all of a sudden they began to realize that life is not all about being an all-star football player or a basketball player or a major league baseball player.

Life is not all about how well you are put together, how beautiful you are. Life is not all about how smart you are, what is your GPA, how intelligent you are. Life is not all about the size of your stock portfolio. Instead, you are a human being, created in the image of God who loves the tar out of you.

When you begin to understand that is the basis of human worth, value, dignity, and significance, it changes everything. **You begin to realize you believe in not the idea of God, instead you believe in the living God.** You don't believe in the idea of Jesus Christ, instead **you believe in a personal God, the Lord Jesus Christ.** When you say: *Mom loves me*, you mean a personal being, my mother loves me. When you say: *Jesus Christ loves me*, you are not talking about a philosophy or an idea. You are talking about the personal creator of heaven and earth who loves me. That changes everything.

What is so unique about Jesus Christ? Three points

So, what is so unique about Jesus Christ? Three points:

1. **Jesus says that there is one God in three persons:** Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, love has existed throughout eternity. You cannot love if there is not someone to love. If Islam tells the truth that Allah is one, then Allah did not love until he created some angels or some human beings – because you cannot love if there is no object to love, no personal being to love. The reason I am so grateful there is one God but who is triune is because Father has loved Son, Son has loved Holy Spirit, Holy Spirit has loved Father throughout eternity. That is what John is talking about when in 1 John he writes:

God is love. --- throughout eternity ---- God is love.

God did not start loving after He created. He has loved throughout eternity. Father has loved Son; Son has loved Holy Spirit; Holy Spirit has loved Father throughout eternity. This personal real God actually loves you and loves me.

2. **Christianity is unique because it teaches the universality of sin.** Now, sin hurts God.

Sin is spurning God's love. Sin is taking the place of God. How ironic that at the Cross God took our place. That is the essence of salvation. The essence of sin is – I want to take God's place. The essence of salvation is – God in Christ took my place when He bled and died on a Cross. He took the penalty that I deserve for my wrong doing, thereby offering me the option of reconciliation, of two estranged parties, God and Cliffe, coming back together again. That is relationship. That unique relationship is different from every other major world religion.

3. The third thing that is so unique about Christianity is that atoning death of Christ on the Cross. This week I want you to reflect, to meditate on the Cross. If you don't understand the Cross of Christ, you are going to miss the uniqueness of Christianity, you are going to miss the love of God.

The first thing I want you to think about is a quote from Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor, that brilliant woman wrote: "**The world has for all its horror**" [and there is plenty of horror in this world, plenty of pain and suffering in this world] "**been found by God to be worth dying for.**" How many people think you are worth dying for? How many people think I am worth dying for? Precious few. But the God at the center of the Cosmos has found you and me and the world, with all its horror, with all its problems, worth dying for. That is a very personal, very unique, very exclusive love.

The second thing I want you to reflect on is – love finds a way to overcome all obstacles in order to unite with the beloved, no matter the cost. Love finds a way to overcome all obstacles with the beloved in order to unite, no matter the cost. That is what the Cross of Christ is all about. God is saying – *I am going to overcome the obstacle of your rebellion against Me, of you spurning My love, of you turning your back on Me.* I am going to overcome that obstacle – I don't care the cost. If it costs My life – fine – Jesus says. I am laying My life down.

Now, when you embrace that love, that changes your ethical system because your ethical system suddenly becomes based on the love of God and your ethical system is comprised of overcoming obstacles with your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your neighbor, your employer/employee, the folks you worship with in church. You begin to be a peacemaker, which means: *I will do whatever is necessary to overcome the obstacles that stand between you and me.* That is exactly what the Cross of Christ is all about. You and I have had a major obstacle between God and us: our rebellion against Him, our problem of the heart – a heart problem. Jesus Christ bled and died on a Cross to overcome that obstacle. When we put our faith in Him, we are overcomers; we overcome obstacles that come between ourselves and others, whatever the cost. That is profound, unique, exclusive love.

The third thing I want you to reflect on this week – Jesus dying on a Cross has a little sign over His head: **King of the Jews** (in three languages). That Cross was such a travesty of justice, it was

incredible. Who condemned Christ? The religious leaders of the day – the Pharisees and the Sadducees. So the religious, moral elite of the day condemned an innocent man. How ironic? How paradoxical? Who carried out the sentence? The leading judicial system of the day – the Roman Empire. How ironic? How paradoxical? The most refined religious authorities of the day, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, teamed up with the leading judicial system of the day, the Roman Empire and its judicial system, and whooped up on an innocent guy. Wow, what is going on here? **The amazing grace of God is kicking in, exposing the depths of depravity of a human heart.**

Guess what? I am no different from the Pharisees and Sadducees and I am no different from the Roman judicial system. For although I present a very polished exterior, inside I am messed up. I am a mixed up kid to be honest with you. I have never met a fellow human being who is not also a mixed up kid. At times, I am capable of incredible goodness; at times, I am one warped human being. I am very grateful that on the screens right now, you don't see all that motivates me because if you did, I would be horribly embarrassed for you to have that information.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist, laid on a bed of straw in a prison camp in Siberia, where he came to the understanding “the line separating good from evil does not run between parties, classes and countries.”

Guess what, friends, it is not the Democrats or the evil folks in the world, and it isn't the Republicans either. All of us, every single, stinking Democrat and every single, stinking Republican has a problem with evil, just the way I do.

That is why I need Jesus Christ. If you don't believe me when I tell you that I have got a problem with evil, all you have to do is call my wife and she will verify that for you.

You see, friends, the Cross of Christ is a statement. The ultimate problem with America today is not political and it is not socio-economic either. The ultimate problem with America today is the human heart. That is why we all, every single one of us, desperately need Jesus Christ to change our hearts, to tie us back in to a right relationship with the living God. That is life. That is joy. That is peace. That is fulfillment.

Fourthly, as you think about the Cross, which is so unique, I want you to think about how the Cross of Christ brings an unexpected quality of God to light, His humility. Why do you think the center of Christianity will soon be Africa, South America, and Asia, especially China? Because when you are disadvantaged, when you are getting the snot kicked out of you in life, when you are poor and you are confronted by a God who humbled Himself and becomes a human being and gets kicked around and nailed to a wooden Cross beam, instinctually you respond. You say: Whoa. That is why if you have a

hard time understanding the uniqueness of Christ, you have to read the Negro spirituals. You have to read the songs of the African American slaves who understood that God is a suffering God, who humbled himself and got the snot kicked out of Him by human beings and was ultimately nailed to a Cross. When you begin to grapple with that, the humility of God, that He would allow human beings whom He created, to nail Him to a wooden Cross, instinctually you are getting kicked around and you want to respond with love, with trust, with devotion.

The final thing I want you to think about the uniqueness of the Cross as you reflect and meditate this week is – only one who has been hurt can forgive. On the Cross, God was hurt. Only one who has been hurt can forgive. On the Cross, God was hurt. That is why when you and I genuinely trust in Christ, revenge is not an option. **Forgiveness is mandatory** because we begin to grapple with the fact that I have been hurt – God has been hurt. God has forgiven me and I have received that forgiveness; now how dare I seek revenge. I *must* forgive.

See, friends, there is nothing like Jesus Christ in any major world religion. You will not find a duplicate. He is radically different, radically unique.

What are the differences between every major religion and Jesus Christ?

The second issue this morning is: not just what makes Jesus Christ unique but what are the differences between every major world religion and Jesus Christ?

Hinduism - Christianity

Hinduism teaches that everything is impersonal ultimately. Brahman is impersonal. Yes, Hinduism also insists that there are thousands of gods. But ultimately, reality is impersonal. What is nirvana? **After you work off your bad karma and achieve nirvana, what is nirvana? Nothingness.**

What is heaven according to Christ? Not nothingness – **heaven according to Jesus Christ is your unique individuality, your unique personality for eternity, loving God and loving others.**

That is why when you read I Corinthians 15, Paul is bending over backwards to argue for a physical, corporal body, a resurrection body. Yes, he calls it a spiritual body, an immortal body, and imperishable body, but the body is always there. **In other words, in heaven, you do not enter the great void. In heaven, you will be you and I will be me.** Why? Because God considers you significant – your personality, your soul are gifts from Him, your body, your rational thinking, your emotions, your ability to love are gifts from Him. That is part of what it means to be created in the image of God.

Buddhism - Christianity

Now I respect Siddhartha Gautama Buddha – gosh, the young man turned his back on a life of materialism and lived the life of an aesthetic and then followed the middle path. But Buddha never once mentions God. Now, how, if Siddhartha Gautama Buddha never once mentions God, and Jesus Christ says: This is eternal life that men might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ. How on earth can you as a thinking human being tell me that they are saying the same thing? They are not. They are contradicting each other. Jesus Christ is saying: The fundamental part of reality, the basic part of reality that you and I need to grasp is – the Creator God.

Buddha is saying: The fundamental part of reality you have to understand is – desire is evil; desire produces suffering; therefore, the solution to the problem of suffering is to cut off your desires.

Jesus says: No, don't cut off your desires. Instead, Jesus says: Learn to distinguish between good desires and bad desires. That is why Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they will be filled. Jesus says: You don't desire enough. You hedonists; you materialists. You have reduced the purpose of life to stimulating your nerve endings and increasing your stock portfolio. You want happiness and that is good. You want fulfillment and that is good. You don't want it badly enough. You are settling for something that is inferior. You were made to know God, to live in a relationship with the Creator of the Cosmos. That is really living. So stoke those desires for fulfillment, for joy, for happiness, for love, for hope – stoke those and begin to examine the options and realize that Jesus Christ answers those questions and meets those desires in the most profound, the most significant way possible.

If I believe in Jesus, that leads to arrogance, intolerance and violence.

Third question: Yeah, Cliffe, but if I believe that Jesus is *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life, I am going to be one arrogant twit. I am going to be intolerant and I am going to be prone to violence. You know all those religious fundamentalists. They are arrogant; they are intolerant; and they are prone to violence, even suicide bombings.

Let's work that one through quickly.

First point, if I believe that $2 + 2 = 5$ and you believe that $2 + 2 = 4$, does that mean that you and I are automatically arrogant? No. It means we disagree about reality. I think $2 + 2 = 5$ and you think $2 + 2 = 4$. That does not make us arrogant. It is a conviction.

What makes us arrogant? **I will tell you what makes us arrogant – how we handle our disagreement.** If I have a superiority attitude and look down on you because you disagree with me, that is

arrogance. But having a conviction that something is true does not necessitate arrogance. It is a conviction of truth. It is the pursuit of what is real. We all disagree. I have never met a human being who agrees with me on everything. That does not make us arrogant because we disagree. What makes us arrogant is how we handle our disagreements.

Look at your marriage. How do you handle disagreements? You can handle them humbly or you can be an arrogant twit. You can have your fight all day long. How do you handle your disagreements on the job? You can be an arrogant son-of-a-gun or you can be humble. You see, just because you have a belief, just because you have a conviction, does not automatically make you arrogant. Everybody has convictions. Everybody has beliefs. What makes you arrogant is if in the midst of those disagreements you have a superiority complex. You look down on somebody else. You demean them. You degrade them because they have the audacity to disagree with me, the fountain of knowledge and truth. That is arrogance.

Now, when you put your faith in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, He commands you to be humble. Humility is acknowledging who God is, and that I am not God, and who I am – a human being created in His image – and that I desperately need to depend on Him. That is humility. So, no, to believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life has nothing to do with being arrogant. It is a totally separate issue.

The question is: Is Jesus real? Is He reliable? Is He trustworthy? If He is, trust in Him. If He is not, reject Him.

Second Issue: Yeah, Cliffe, but if I believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, **I am going to be intolerant of others.** I will be intolerant of atheists. I will be intolerant of Jews. I will be intolerant of Buddhists or Hindus.

Really? Shame on you. If you put your faith in Jesus Christ, who are you trusting? **You are trusting the One who, as He was nailed to a wooden cross beam, instead of cursing His enemies the way I would have, He prays: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. – Friends, that is the essence of tolerance.**

When you read the Gospels, do you ever notice Jesus manipulating people, coercing people in order to believe in Him? No, He sets the truth forth plainly and when He says to the rich young ruler: Sell all your possessions. Give to the poor and come, follow Me. The dude puts his head down and walks away. Christ lets him walk. He says: Here, man, here is the claim. Here is the truth. Now you choose to believe in Me or not. The guy says: No. And he walks away. That is the way Christ dealt with people, honestly, respecting them, with integrity.

Now, I don't have to exercise any tolerance with you if you come up to me after this service and give me a \$1000. I will have to exercise no tolerance. But if you come up to me after the service and say: You know, Cliffe, I have not heard an idiot as big as you. Then I am going to have to exercise some tolerance.

We exercise tolerance in the way we show respect and love for people who disagree with us – not the way we agree with people who agree with us.

Third point: Yeah, but come on, Cliffe. If I put my faith in Jesus and if I believe in Him as *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life, **I am going to be prone to violence.**

Really? **When you read the Gospels, when you look at people who are peacemakers, what you began to realize is power must subject itself to truth.** If you believe it is wrong to fight in a holy war, if you believe it is wrong to go jihad, if you believe it is wrong to be a suicide bomber, why do you believe that? Because you have a conviction that power must subject itself to truth. **If the truth is that human beings are valuable, if the truth is that human beings have significance and dignity because they are created in the image of God, then you know that to violently hurt people is wrong.** Why do you know that? Because you have a conviction of what is truth.

Gandhi had a conviction of what is true. Dr. Martin Luther King had a conviction of what is true. **Every peacemaker understood truth trumps power.** The challenge for me as a human being is to learn how to submit my power in my marriage, as a father, in my job, in living my life. Power must submit to truth. **So when you put your faith in Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, you are not going to abuse power; instead, you will seek to use the power that God has invested in you to promote justice, to promote compassion, to promote kindness, to promote grace.**

Jesus Christ loves you personally & died in your place

Ernest Gordon was dean of the chapel at Princeton University for 26 years. Ernest Gordon was a prisoner in a Japanese prisoner of war camp on the Thai-Burma border. When Ernest Gordon was put in that Japanese prisoner of war camp, he was not a believer in Christ. But due to the life he saw lived by some inmates who were committed to Christ, Ernest Gordon converted and put his faith in Christ. He writes about those experiences he had in that Japanese prisoner of war camp during World War II. He wrote accounts. "One day all the prisoners were out in the field doing their hard manual labor. At the end of the day, the Japanese guards lined them up, counted the shovels, and found that one shovel was missing. The Japanese guard stood in front of the lined-up inmates and asked: Who stole the shovel? None of the inmates responded. The Japanese guard cocked his rifle and says: All die, all die. Suddenly

one Scottish soldier stepped forward and said: I stole the shovel. Instantly he was shot dead. The inmates gathered up the shovels and gathered up his dead body to bring him back to the prisoner of war camp. Inside, the guards counted the shovels again and they found that no shovel was missing. That Scottish soldier sacrificed his life so that his buddies might live.”

That is exactly what happened at the Cross of Christ. It is this Jesus who is love, not the idea of love; He is a loving being. It is this Jesus who invites you and me to trust in Him and to grow a conviction that indeed He is the way, He is the truth, and He is the life – because He is a personal God. He is not an idea of a god floating out there. He really does love you the same way your mother probably really loves you. So, when you say: Jesus loves me, you mean it in the same way as when you say: My mom loves me. **When you begin to live in the ocean of the love of God, the love of Christ, it radically changes you from the inside out. God bless you as you trust exclusively, uniquely in the God who has a name, who finds you irreplaceable, who has a special love and care for you – for that, ladies and gentlemen, is the key to life.**

Let’s bow and pray together.

Father in heaven,

We bow before You, praising you and thanking You that You are not the heavenly engineer, instead You are our Father who is in heaven. That is why we worship You. That is why we adore You. That is why we love You. We are simply responding to Your amazing grace.

Thank You for the Cross of Christ, totally unique, totally different. Thank You for grace which separates following You from every other major world religion. Thank You Lord Jesus that three days after You died, You rose from the dead, which means You are reliable like nobody else.

Jesus, help us not to be arrogant or intolerant or to be prone to violence – but instead to take our power and to submit it to Your truth and then to be women and men of justice who promote mercy and who walk humbly before You, the living God. In Christ’s name, Amen